

the  
**CrossFit**  
JOURNAL ARTICLES

## The Dumbbell Bear

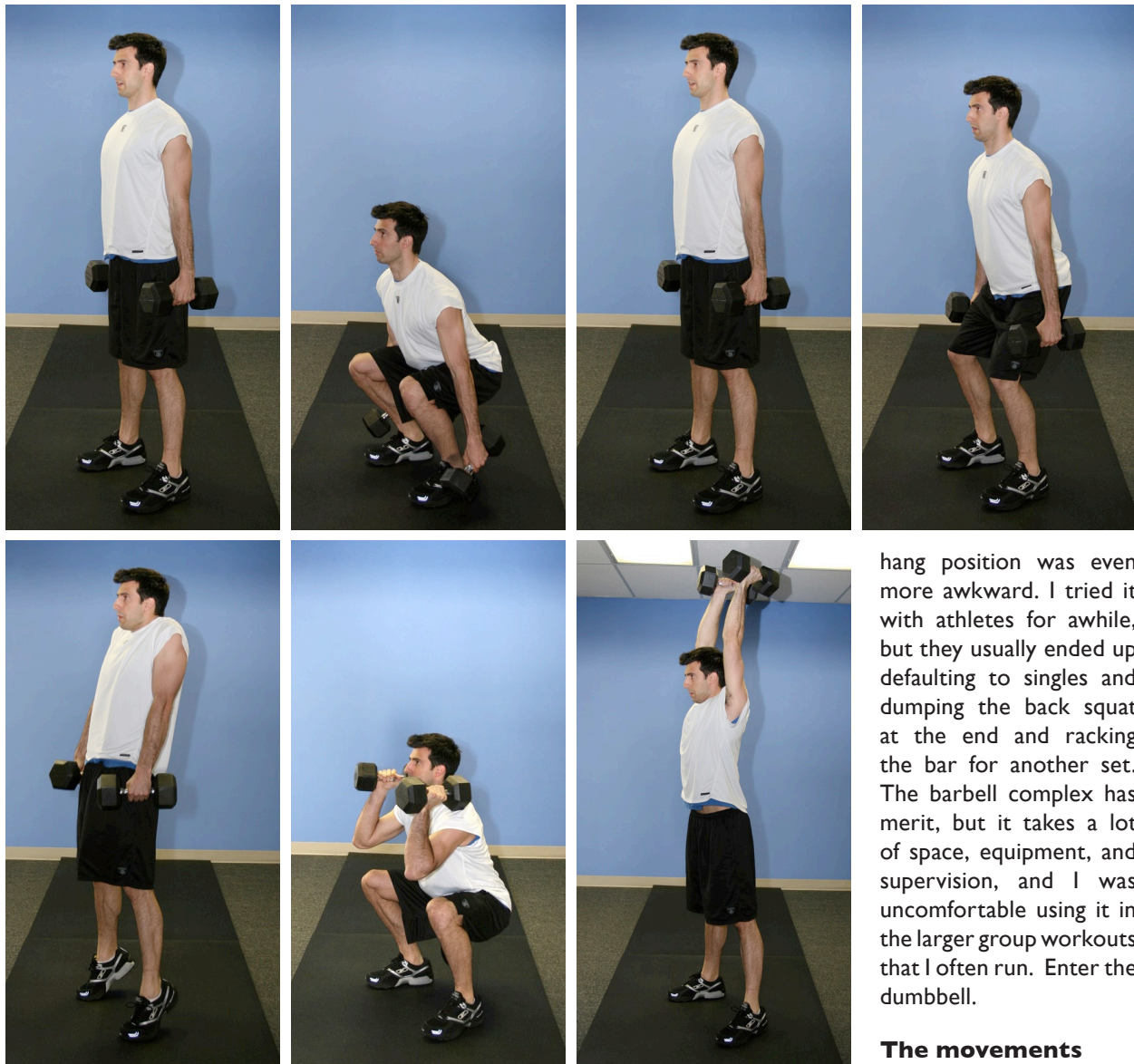
Mike Rutherford



While standing in a grocery store line the other day, I picked up one of the popular mainstream men's fitness publications. (I confess.) They are all the same. The models are topless, lean, and tan. Their makeup jobs take longer than those of all the girls I like, and their teeth are bigger and whiter than Mr. Ed's. To my utter amazement, though, the models in this particular issue were performing functional dumbbell movements (in this case the dumbbell snatch)! Not a biceps curl in sight! I would like to think the *CrossFit Journal* and this column are partly responsible.

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## The Dumbbell Bear (continued...)



hang position was even more awkward. I tried it with athletes for awhile, but they usually ended up defaulting to singles and dumping the back squat at the end and racking the bar for another set. The barbell complex has merit, but it takes a lot of space, equipment, and supervision, and I was uncomfortable using it in the larger group workouts that I often run. Enter the dumbbell.

### The movements

Mainstream or not, this month's installment of the "Dumbbell Coach" column will focus on a challenge from my DVD *Dumbbell Moves, Vol. 2*. The dumbbell Bear is a unique complex that combines three of the most productive weight-lifting movements in a smoker of a task-priority workout.

### History

I learned of the barbell version of the Bear in 2003. That version included a power clean, front squat, push press, and back squat in succession. The push press to back squat transition was difficult. The back squat to

My dumbbell version of the Bear consists of deadlifts, hang power cleans, and front squat / push presses (thrusters).

In this case, the deadlift begins from standing, with the dumbbells at the sides in the hang position. They are then simply lowered to the deck and back up by flexing and then extending the hips and knees while maintaining a flat back and upright torso. The feet are at about shoulder width and toed out slightly. The properly performed lift will have the feet flat on the deck with the weight rear to mid foot. Coach the athlete to stay out of the front of the foot. The tendency will be to

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reach the leading blob (head) of the dumbbell toward the deck at the bottom of the lift. This is fine and is not considered a foul.

The second component, the dumbbell hang power clean, is initiated by dipping with the hips and knees from the hang to bring the dumbbells down to knee height, followed immediately by an explosive extension of the knee and hip and shrug of the dumbbells up to the rack position at the shoulders. I coach the hammer hand position for this complex. I like the way the dumbbell racks and it keeps the blob out of the athlete's grill.

The complex is finished with the thruster. At the conclusion of the final rep of the clean, the athlete maintains the racked position and performs a front squat. The same form rules apply as with the deadlift. The torso must be erect and tight, with the dumbbells racked at the shoulders. A flimsy rack position will punish the athlete, pitching him forward out of position. The finish is an upward drive out of the squat and explosive drive of the dumbbells overhead to full extension of the shoulders and arms. In my opinion, the thruster is a launching-pad movement for complex training. This is a brutal way to finish the dumbbell Bear.

### Execution

After mastering each of the movements that make up the sequence, it is time to begin. The strongest athletes will start with a set of dumbbells weighing about 45 percent of their body weight. Obviously, the coach must assess the athlete's strength fitness and scale the load appropriately. The coach will also need a countdown stopwatch that will count at least twenty intervals, or a wall clock with a second hand and a way to count and record rounds completed. The stopwatch is set for twenty one-minute periods. On the start command, the athlete performs the following, in immediate sequence:

1. Five dumbbell dead lifts
2. Five dumbbell hang power cleans
3. Five dumbbell thrusters

The dumbbells may be placed on the floor as the athlete

awaits the next interval. If the athlete completes the sequence in 40 seconds, for example, then 20 seconds of recovery are left before the start of the next interval. The objective is to stay on the interval, performing five reps of each movement within the minute, for a total of twenty intervals. The score is recorded as X/Y, where X equals the number of rounds performed as prescribed (within the minute) and Y equals the number of rounds completed for the remainder of the 20 minutes, however long each one takes. Most intermediate to advanced athletes will find this very demanding.

There are a couple of technique issues that you will no doubt observe. The deadlift tends to erode into a straight-legged venture. The hang power clean starts to look like a power curl, and the thruster sometimes does not conclude with full extension all the way overhead. I do not allow the straight-

legged deadlift to continue, and I insist on full overhead extension (overhead—not out front) on the thruster. Anything less is a foul. I do tolerate a certain amount of power curling as the athlete tires, since it's only less efficient and powerful, not dangerous or incomplete. Be a hard ass. This is coaching.

### Scaling

This challenge can and should be scaled to make it accessible and useful to a variety of athletes. You can scale it down (or up) by altering the number of reps, the time requirements, and the load, and also by modifying the movements. The novice will not survive this as written. Let them be successful! Scale it to their ability; make it challenging but completable.

### Bear progression

When an athlete completes all reps on the interval for the whole period, it's time to dial up the workout intensity. Increase the reps to six of each per minute for the next challenge. Once six has been mastered, seven becomes the magic number. The load remains static. The litmus test lies in the ability to perform more and more work with this same load.

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## The Dumbbell Bear (continued...)

### Variant 1

While I've never pulled this variant out for public consumption, I propose that this cousin to the Bear be known as Smokey Bear. This version would be a density version (rather than the set-interval version) looking to cram as many rounds as possible into a 15-minute period. Stay with the same boundaries. Use sets of five reps, just as in the original version, and loading of 45 percent of bodyweight. I estimate that an elite performance would number about 17 to 20 rounds in the allotted period.

### Variant 2

Another (brutal) approach to the Bear—providing a somewhat different stimulus and an intense neural-pathway challenge—is to string one rep of each of the three movements together to constitute a single rep of the complex. In series, perform one dumbbell deadlift, then one power clean, and then immediately one thruster. That is rep #1. Return the bells to the hang,

and go again. You could do this on set intervals, as in the original (three complexes per minute would likely be enough of a challenge), or in a density incarnation (max reps in, say, 15 minutes?), as in variant 1. Compare your performances across the different ways of structuring the complex.

I'm interested in receiving feedback on this challenge. Post your results, and your suggestions for variations, scaling, and progressions, to the CrossFit message board. I look forward to hearing your take on it.



Dumbbell Bear



Michael Rutherford (a.k.a. Coach Rut) is the owner of [CrossFit Kansas City/Boot Camp Fitness](#). He has over a quarter-century of fitness coaching experience with athletes of all ages. He has also worked in hospital wellness environments and rehabilitation clinics. Coach Rut holds academic degrees in biology, physical education, and exercise physiology and sports biomechanics. He is a USAW-certified Club Coach and is a CrossFit level 3 trainer. He is also the current national Masters Champion in weightlifting at 94 kg. You can learn more dumbbell exercises from his DVDs [Dumbbell Moves Volume 1](#) and [Volume 2](#).